

Introduction to Islam



Great Mosque at Damascus (Photo: G. Lewis)

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Origins and the Life of Muhammad the Prophet

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are three of the world's great monotheistic faiths. They share many of the same holy sites, such as Jerusalem, and prophets, such as Abraham. Collectively, scholars refer to these three religions as the Abrahamic faiths, since it is believed that Abraham and his family played vital roles in the formation of these religions.

Islam began with the Prophet Muhammad. Islam means "surrender" and its central idea is a surrendering to the will of God. Its central article of faith is that "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger".

Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims believe that they are following in the same tradition as the Judeo-Christian figures Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus who they believe were significant prophets before Muhammad.



Bifolium from the "Nurse's Qur'an" (Mushaf al-Hadina), c. 1019-20 C.E., Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment, 44.5 x 60 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, provides very little detail about Muhammad's life; however, the hadiths, or sayings of the Prophet, which were largely compiled in the centuries following Muhammad's death, provide a larger narrative for the events in his life (although there is significant debate in the Muslim world as to which Hadiths are accurate).

Muhammad was born in 570 C.E. in Mecca, and his early life was unremarkable. He married a wealthy widow named Khadija who was 15 years older and his employer. Around 610 C.E., Muhammad had his first religious experience, where he was instructed to recite by the Angel Gabriel. After a period of introspection and self-doubt, Muhammad accepted his role as God's prophet and began to preach word of the one God, or Allah in Arabic. His first convert was his wife.

Muhammad's divine recitations form the Qur'an and are organized into books (surahs) and verses (ayat). Because these revelations focused on a form of monotheism considered threatening to Mecca's ruling tribe (the Quraysh), which Muhammad was a part of, the early Muslims faced

significant persecution. Eventually in 622, Muhammad and his followers fled Mecca for the city of Yathrib, which is known as Medina today, where his community was welcomed. This event is known as the Hijra, or emigration. 622, the year of the Hijra (A.H.), marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, which is still in use today.

Between 625-630 C.E., there were a series of battles fought between the Meccans and Muhammad and the new Muslim community. Eventually, Muhammad was victorious and reentered Mecca in 630.

One of Muhammad's first actions was to purge the Kaaba of all of its idols (before this, the Kaaba was a major site of pilgrimage for the polytheistic religious traditions of the Arabian Peninsula and contained numerous idols of pagan gods). The Kaaba is believed to have been built by Abraham (or Ibrahim as he is known in Arabic) and his son, Ishmael. The Arabs claim descent from Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. The Kaaba then became the most important center for pilgrimage in Islam.

In 632, Muhammad died in Medina. Muslims believe that he was the final in a line of prophets, which included Moses, Abraham, and Jesus.

After Muhammad's Death

The century following Muhammad's death was dominated by military conquest and expansion. Muhammad was succeeded by the four "rightly-guided" Caliphs (khalifa or successor in Arabic): Abu Bakr (632-34 C.E.), Umar (634-44 C.E.), Uthman (644-56 C.E.), and Ali (656-661 C.E.). The Qur'an is believed to have been codified during Uthman's reign. The final caliph, Ali, was married to Fatima, Muhammad's daughter and was murdered in 661. The death of Ali is a very important event; his followers, who believed that he should have succeeded Muhammad directly, became known as the Shi'a ("party" or "followers"), referring to the followers of Ali. Today, the Shi'ite community is composed of several different branches, and there are large Shia populations in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. The Sunnis, who do not hold that Ali should have directly

succeeded Muhammad, compose the largest branch of Islam; their adherents can be found across North Africa, the Middle East, as well as in Asia and Europe.

During the seventh and early eighth centuries, the Arab armies conquered large swaths of territory in the Middle East, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Central Asia, despite ongoing civil wars in Arabia and the Middle East. Eventually, the Umayyad Dynasty emerged as the rulers, with Abd al-Malik completing the Dome of the Rock, one of the earliest surviving Islamic monuments, in 691/2 C.E. The Umayyads reigned until 749/50 C.E., when they were overthrown. The Abbasid Dynasty assumed the Caliphate and ruled large sections of the Islamic world. However, with the Abbasid Revolution, no one ruler would ever again control all of the Islamic lands.